

Interview with Julia Taft

The Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training Foreign Affairs Oral History Project

AMBASSADOR JULIA TAFT

Interviewed by: Charles Stuart Kennedy

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[Note: This interview has not been edited by Ms. Taft]

Q: Today is the fifth of April, 1996. This interview with Julia Taft is being done on behalf of the Association for Diplomatic Studies and I am Charles Stuart Kennedy. Okay, if we can start by just, can you give me a bit about your background, a little about the family, and early education, when and where you were born, that sort of thing, the idea being that I think people in the 25th century would kind of like to know who these people are and where they're coming from?

TAFT: All right. Well, I am an Army brat. My father was a surgeon in the U.S. Army Medical Corps and I spent my early years actually growing up in Colorado and then going to Germany. We lived four years in Germany after the second world war.

Q: *Where in Germany?*

TAFT: Frankfurt.

Q: *The 97th General [Hospital]?*

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TAFT: You bet. Ear, eye, nose and throat.

Q: My daughter...one daughter was born at the 97th General. TAFT: Okay, so you know it well.

Q: Well, I used to be the baby birth officer in Frankfurt, and think we registered a couple hundred kids a month there.

TAFT: Well, it was a wonderful experience because we went over in 1950 and saw all of the reconstruction efforts on the part of the German people, so Frankfurt was really a totally changed city by the time we left. That's where I spent really very important developmental years, which I think, in fact, had an impact on my international interest.

Q: You were there from when to when?

TAFT: From when I was eight until twelve years old, from 19...you shouldn't be asking how old I am!

Q: Oh certainly, but this is a historic record.

TAFT: Okay, this was 1950 to 1954. Now my father actually had been born in Italy and came to the United States when he was about twelve after the eruption of Mount Aetna and the earthquake in Messina. That was terrible and his family's homestead was destroyed. His father died in Messina, and they came and lived in Philadelphia. So he went to the University of Pennsylvania. When he graduated he went to medical school and joined the U.S. Army. So I'm a first generation and we have always had a great affection for Europe. In the years that I lived there with my family, we traveled all over and of course spent a lot of time in Italy as well. So that really was a very important time in my life.

Other than that, my father retired in El Paso, Texas, and then I went to college at the University of Colorado graduate and undergraduate. After that...

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Q: Sorry, go back a minute. What was your major graduate and undergrad?

TAFT: Political science. I'm better at what I do here than as a student, because I'll have to tell you a funny story. When I was a graduate student I had to write my Master's thesis, and my specialty at that time had been Middle East studies. I had to develop an outline and a preliminary 10- or 15-pager on what my final thesis was going to be. At that time I was a procrastinator, and waited until the last week and then went full blow and wrote this thing about the Arab national movement, and the tensions between the United Arab Republic, which was a combination of Syria and Egypt at the time, and Israel. And my thesis was that the Egyptians and the Syrians needed the threat of Israel for their own political cohesiveness. They needed to have this sort of cancer in the side of the Middle East as a galvanizing point for their own nationalism movement. And in the same vein, Israel needed its enemy to be clearly identified to continue its plea for support from the United States. So that there was a creative love-hate relationship.

I wrote this thing beautifully, spent night and day, it was due on the following Monday, I completed it and ran up at 5:00 in the evening to my adviser and I gave him this document, and I said, "This is it. This is my paper and I hope you like it." And he said, "Well, what is the theme?" And I said "Well, that they need each other, Israel and the UAR, and therefore they'll never go to war with each other." He said, "That's sort of interesting." And I said "Well, I hope so." So he said, "Well, I'll read it." And I went and turned on the radio in my car to go home, and the newscast was the beginning of the Seven Day War.

At that point I knew I was never going to be a really good political theorist. This was 1967. After that I gave up for a little while and worked. [That paper] didn't get accepted as a thesis topic. About a year later I went back and wrote [a thesis] about the terrorism of Stalin. I figured he was dead, and I'd be in pretty good shape.

Q: After you got out of University of Colorado with your Master's degree, then what?

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TAFT: I went and worked for Radio Free Europe in New York City. Well, actually, between my undergraduate and graduate I worked at Radio Free Europe. Then I went back to the University of Colorado for my graduate degree. Subsequently I worked for a coalition of higher education organizations called the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education out in the West, dealing with higher education and particularly the health sciences.

One day I was reading the Chronicle of Higher Education and I saw an advertisement for the White House Fellows Program. So I sent away for an application, got this application in the mail, and just, it bowled me over. First of all, it sounded very exciting. I wanted to do it, but they asked for credentials and experiences that I really knew I couldn't measure up to. They wanted to know whether the degrees were...what your degrees were in, how many countries you'd consulted with, how many books you had written, what kinds of community activities you were leading in, and so I put it away, and wrote on my calendar that the next year I should send away for the application again.

I spent the next year working at WICHE, completing my Master's thesis on Stalin, completing two books that I had in progress that I hadn't completed, and doing a lot of the things that were kind of the finishing of works in progress...activities in progress, such as helping complete a fundraising strategy for the local theater group and things like that. The following year I sent away for the application. I [completed] it and I was accepted and became a White House Fellow for 1970-71.

Q: This would be early Nixon...?

TAFT: That's right.

Q: You mentioned books. What were you writing?

TAFT: Oh, these were how-to-do books. Well, one of them was about primary medical care in the West, how you organize health care services for sparsely settled areas, what

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kinds of extension services you need. You don't need doctors, but how do you get the care out there, and how do you make sure it's appropriate for the kinds of medical interventions that are necessary. We did a lot of work obviously on barefoot doctor concepts...and nurses.

Q: Barefoot doctor being a Chinese concept of basically-trained medics going out into the village?

TAFT: That's right, [including] what we would call in the developing world traditional birth assistance, midwifery programs. Trying to find ways to arrange for real practical experiences by specialists in academic medical schools to come out and see what practical family medicine ought to look like. And what was so creative about, not my...I was just writing up reports and sort of state-of-the-art, but the real genius behind the whole family medicine grew out of people that we had the privilege of working with in Colorado. Now one of the fastest growing specialties is family practice, but this was before 1970 when we were really thinking about how do you look at the health care profession from what people really do need. And you find they need preventative health care, they need the family, they need the patient to be a leader of the team, not the doctor always being the decision maker in a medical intervention. It was great stuff. So it was basically writing about that.

Q: Could you describe your Fellows at the White House?

TAFT: There were 17 fellows my year. I was the only woman and one of only three that were not married. So we had a wide variety of skills and backgrounds in this group. We had five military officers, the rest were everything from the man who really developed the first computer chip, to a nuclear physicist, to a number two person at a major Fortune 500 company. And then there was me, and I was this girl from Colorado.

My assignment was to the Office of the Vice President, and you may recall the incumbent at that time was Spiro T. Agnew. He was quite something, and I went to work there and

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spent most of my time [covering] his responsibilities on Native Americans. He was the Chairman for the National Council for Indian Opportunity. He didn't care anything about Indians, but I just thought they were terrific, coming from the West [as I was].

And at that point, history won't remember I'm sure because so much of Nixon's reputation recorded by history will revolve around Watergate, but there were a couple of things he did that were really quite wonderful, and one was his policy toward Native Americans. And he had, through this National Council which Agnew chaired, a very determined policy to turn over the functions of management, ownership, and responsibility to the Native American people in this country. And there was a series of efforts called the Self-Determination Acts that really brought a whole new sense of dignity and well-being to the reservations around the country. So I was involved in that with the Vice President.

And the other thing that happened at this time, which was very good, is that state and local governments became much more important entities in their partnership with the federal government on program management and design. And that was a time when the federal budget started something called the revenue-sharing concept. And the U.S. government would collect taxes and then they would just turn over in almost block grants to the cities large chunks of money for infrastructure and basic support services. That was revolutionary because before that the federal government held onto the money, held onto the programs, and this was a real devolution of authority. This was the other thing I worked on in my Fellows year.

But the best thing about the Fellowship was that the Fellows were assigned Cabinet officers, and we would meet at least once, sometimes twice a day, in addition to our work we'd either have breakfast or lunch or dinner and talk about issues that were cross-cutting. And we had a whole series of private-sector and government speakers with us in seminar discussions on the issues of the day. From the Fellowship's perspective, we would bring to the table not only our own personal and professional background, but what our agency thought about this issue or that issue, and we had a wonderful opportunity for a whole year

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to really see across-the-board different perspectives on key issues of the day. And it was a wonderful learning experience and a very wonderful personal one because we've stayed very close through the years.

Q: I wonder if you could give me, because somebody who gets misseon everything as Vice President Agnew...

TAFT: I'm not saying he shouldn't have been missed!

Q: ...I'm just wondering working with him what kind of person was he?

TAFT: We later found out he was a crook.

Q: Other than that, Mrs. Lincoln!

TAFT: He was a wonderful speaker. He wrote and gave speeches which were so polemical, he really crystallized issues, he was very conservative, very colorful in his speech, as we found, as the general public has found out, Pat Buchanan wrote quite a number of them, so he was a very good public speaker and he really resonated with the conservatives. This was also a time, it was right after Kent State...

Q: Kent State being when the National Guard fired into Vietnaanti-war protesters at Kent State University in Ohio.

TAFT: That's right. All of this period was very difficult because of the war protesters, and Agnew for some reason got on his high horse condemning them, and alienating himself from the academic community and from the youth of our country. It was really incredible. But as a person he was quite nice. He did spend quite an awful lot of time vacationing at Palm Springs in California with Frank Sinatra who was a great singer and friend. I did not think he was an extremely serious man. He had been the governor of Maryland at one point, which was why he was on the ticket, but he was not an asset to our country.

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Q: How did you find the White House as far as being a woman at the time, because the Nixon administration wasn't as sensitive to gender as we are now.

TAFT: Well, this was still very early in the experience of both the White House Fellowship Program and our own awareness of gender issues in our country. I had no trouble at all, and I'd never have any trouble because I've always thought of my gender as an asset, I've never been apologetic, I've never been angry. I've only worked with men and I enjoy working with men. Being the only girl with all these Fellows, I was also the youngest and they'd treat me like a little kid sister and say, "Go out of the room while we're telling these dirty jokes," or whatever they're going to do. But it was not a problem. I do think it was very rare to have women high up with access to Cabinet officers, but you've got to start somewhere, and we've come a long way since then.

Q: Did you feel at all the effect of the White House paranoia, Erlichman and Haldemann and President Nixon and all, or was that just...?

TAFT: Not while I was a White House Fellow, now later I came back into the White House, and we can get into that if you want to. But at that time, no, everything was going swimmingly, this was 1970-71. Haldemann was probably the best Chief-of-Staff that any President ever had. He knew what was going on. He determined who got to see the President. He followed up on everything that was important, and he controlled that place. And the President himself was very confident and very able in foreign affairs, had the respect of Henry Kissinger, which is not easy to get, but he had his respect.

[During Nixon's] first term, and this is when I first started, he had some very exciting domestic initiatives. I've mentioned the Indian one, and then the revenue-sharing. But subsequently I went to work for the Department of Health, Education and Welfare and we were really going. We had new health insurance concepts, new welfare reform package, a new education program, new ways to deal with rehabilitation services and the developmentally disabled. It was very, very exciting, and all of that, those good directions

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and that excitement and real constructive change in some social programs really has fallen off the scope, and right now the listeners or the readers will hear many years hence, but even right today, only 25 years later, nobody remembers that.

Q: You left there in '71, and where to?

TAFT: All the Fellows had their onward assignments and went to be presidents of universities, or whatever they were going to do, and they kept saying, "Okay, Julia, what are you going to do?" And I've always wanted to go work in Africa, but I didn't want to be a Peace Corps volunteer, but I thought what I would do would be to go to Africa after my fellowship and meet the people who were doing community-based programs and the kind of work that I thought I could do, because I thought I was good at organizing and motivating people and really was interested in the social services question.

So I took off and I went to Africa and I spent some time meeting people in the countryside and in the cities, people who worked for the United Nations organizations, those that were in the Peace Corps, private voluntary organizations, the NGOs. And I came back and I decided that Africa didn't need me in Africa. I could probably be much more effective dealing with longer-term policy questions from the Washington scene, because I felt like I really understood Washington. So I applied for a job as Elliot Richardson's special assistant.

Q: Who was at that time...?

TAFT: Who was at that time Secretary of Health, Education and Welfare. This did not relate to Africa, but I kind of got that out of my system. And I became Elliot's special assistant for a couple of years, and was his liaison with all of the national organizations and interest groups: the labor unions, the education organizations, the welfare groups, the minority groups, everybody, during this time of a really creative legislative agenda. That was very exciting.

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Then we had the election, '72, and that's the Watergate era, and President Nixon did win; lost only two places, Massachusetts and Washington, DC, so we really didn't need to worry about all this Watergate stuff. And among his first appointments was to send Elliot Richardson to the Defense Department and to bring a man named Caspar Weinberger over to be the Secretary of Health, Education and Welfare. Caspar Weinberger had been one of our biggest problems when we were doing all this great legislative social agenda, and it was kind of a blow to many of us that were very committed to it, that the budgeteer who was trying to put constraints on the social question...

Q: Caspar Weinberger was the...?

TAFT: He was the Director of the Office of Management and Budget. But he came and so Elliot said, "Okay, Julia, you need to stay here," because I wanted to go to Defense, he said, "No, you've got to stay here and help the new Secretary get established. It's important for him to understand what the interest groups believe and what this process has been."

So I stayed, and it was the best decision I ever made because in that process, there were two people that Cap Weinberger brought over. One was Frank Carlucci who had been his deputy at OMB, and a young aide called Will Taft, who was his chief-of-staff/special assistant. During the course of the next few months I needed to explain what it was I did, and I worked very closely with Mr. Taft in the transition, and to make a long story short, about a year and a half later we got married. So it was a very good human development story here!

Weinberger turned out to be a great Secretary of Health, Education and Welfare, and we had a number of really good successes during his tenure. He was followed by David Matthews who had been the President of the University of Alabama. While David...let me back up...

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One of the things that happened while Weinberger was Secretary was the fall of Vietnam. I was still working at HEW when a friend of mine came in to say that Vietnam was [close to collapse] and that there were all of these children who had been already identified and cleared for adoption in the United States that would probably not be able to leave if there weren't a special effort to evacuate them. And I said, "Now what does this have to do with me?" And he said, "Because you can do something." So I went over to AID and started a series of meetings in what ultimately came to be called Operation Babylift, and we were involved in getting out these kids and some evacuations in early April 1975.

And I was there one Saturday afternoon when the AID Administrator received an invitation to a command performance meeting at 4:00 that afternoon in the State operations center to discuss the total evacuation of Vietnam, and among the invitees was the Secretary of Health, Education and Welfare, Caspar Weinberger. So Mr. Parker, who was the AID Administrator, said, "Julia, where's Cap Weinberger?" And I said, "I don't know where he is today." And he said, "He's not going to come to this meeting. Why don't you come to this meeting and you represent HEW." So I went. And I'll never forget it, April 18, 1975.

I went and it was the first time I'd ever been involved in a real State Department operation center briefing and meeting, and it just sounded so interesting and so important and there were so many lives at stake here. I got all the information, went back the next day and spent the whole day in the Ops Center. The following Monday I went to the Secretary at HEW and I asked him if I could be his representative and get detailed over to State to do the HEW portion of this. He said that would be fine, that I could do that, and I did. And then six weeks later I was running the whole thing, and it was a fabulous experience.

Q: Let's talk about what was the situation, and how did we respond, and what were the problems and all?

TAFT: Well, I don't know how much time you have, but I'll try to synthesize it because actually I'm being interviewed next week by somebody who's writing a book about this.

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It was one of the real success stories of, it was the only success story with Vietnam, and was a really incredible success story of U.S. cooperation.

In 1975 there were still people [by] March and early April, particularly our Ambassador to Vietnam, Graham Martin, who [still] said, "If you just give us a little bit more money, the South Vietnamese will be able to stave off the onslaught from the North." And there were people in our foreign service in Vietnam and people who were working in the operations center and on the personal staff of Secretary Kissinger, who was Secretary of State, who did not believe this at all. And they were seeing things unraveling, and many of them were sending back channel messages saying, "We've got to evacuate. Stop this. The intelligence reports, everything shows that this is going down the tubes, there's panic all over the country, we've got to figure out how we're going to get out of here."

And already, there were still a few commercial planes that were going into Vietnam, PanAmerican was still flying in and they were bringing their own people out, and bringing a lot of folks out. But there was this incredible tension in the political hierarchy as to what was really happening there.

Then they started a task force. It was a task force to deal with the evacuation, so that was mid-April, so it was very clear by that time, no one was going to put in any more money. The question was how many refugees might we have, how much longer would the invasion from the North take? So there was some squabbling about dates but the inevitability was quite clear. Nobody was really paying attention to Cambodia at the time, everything was focused on Vietnam. Obviously Cambodia would become the focus quite shortly thereafter.

The operations center was originally run by Dean Brown who was a former undersecretary for management at State and then subsequently went to the Middle-East Institute. He came back in for a special assignment just to get the task force going. But it was great because the State Department detailed [to the task force] many of the top-notch foreign

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service people who had been in Vietnam, who either did not have onward assignments, I mean they had the best people around. But they also needed to bring together the domestic agencies and the Defense Department.

So they set up this task force where full-time senior representatives worked around the clock in the operation center from Labor Department, Health, Education and Welfare, the Defense Department, the CIA, Immigration and Naturalization Service, cause these are the people who have to clear on anyone who's coming in. We had the State Department, USIA. There were about 100 people that were working in various shifts in State operation center. Then each of them was responsible for dealing in their parent agency with the task force there to support.

[The task force met] every day and said, "What are the tasks today? Who needs to do what? How are we going to get this thing done?" And then you'd leave the table and go back and tell your parent agency, "Here are the five things you've got to do today." It was ... Dean Brown set it up, I just inherited it and kept it going till the conclusion, but it was really wonderfully done because it was so task-oriented, it was in the State Department, it didn't have a lot of White House interference, it had the right agencies represented by the right people.

We got an early appropriation from Congress of over \$300 million to manage this activity, and nobody at that time knew exactly how many refugees we were going to have to resettle or how much it was going to cost. When I took over, which was in June, we had 131,000 refugees in camps around the country, in Guam, Wake Island, and in Thailand. And all of those people were resettled into homes and communities in the United States by the 20th of December.

Q: How about looking at this, because these interviews deal with foreign affairs and this is obviously a major foreign affair event, how did you find the various organizations dealing with this? I would think for example, I've worked with INS from time to time, you know, their

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main thing is how to keep people out rather than put people in, did everybody rise to the occasion?

TAFT: Well, we had a lot of help from President Ford. My sort of godfather in this was Dick Cheney who was the Chief of Staff to President Ford, and Paul O'Neill who was the number two in the Office of Management and Budget. They were assigned by the President to be supportive in anything we needed to get done. But I also had Caspar Weinberger, very supportive, and Kissinger wanting it to work very much. Schlesinger, who was the Secretary of Defense, wanted it to work, but he wanted it to be over with, so we constantly had this issue with the Defense Department about, "Why don't we turn this over to HEW?" I knew HEW didn't even have a fax machine, well, of course nobody had a fax machine, but they had no cable, they had no secure files, they didn't work on weekends, they had no capacity, so there was that problem.

INS [Immigration and Naturalization Service] was originally reluctant, but the President had a Cabinet meeting, [during which] he said that this was the most important initiative his government was working on. It had to be the top priority [for all agencies], except for DOD, [where] the top priority was nuclear war and protecting us in a nuclear war, [but] the next thing down was this task force. And he made it very clear that anything that needed to be done would be done. Now we had a particular problem with, well, there were lots of problems with Immigration, but I'll never forget how two of them were solved.

One of [the stereotypes] many people in this country [held was that] the people who lost the war in Vietnam were prostitutes, and drug users, and murderers, and all kinds of things. Now we had to show in a convincing way that the people who were coming to this country were worthy of coming, and worthy of our saving them, and giving them asylum.

So there's all this, it was very important that we could document that nobody was on a black list, anybody's black list. We had a person who was assigned to work with all of the agencies that have to do clearances before you can get paroled into the country or allowed

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into the country. The FBI [Federal Bureau of Investigation], the Drug Enforcement Agency, the INS, the CIA, the Defense Intelligence Agency, there were seven of them. All of them had different lists, so this person was responsible for making sure all of the lists were the same.

And he goes over to the INS to discuss their hit lists, of course they didn't have a hit on any of these people, but they had to be involved. So our person went over there and said, "Okay, we'd like to see what your database looks like so we can do a quick run and see if there are any people who we should exclude that are in your files." Well, their files were all 3x5 cards. And there were little old ladies in tennis shoes going through every single one: "Twong Ton Tee, Twong..." you know, it was just unbelievable. So that was a real problem.

It got solved when the Commissioner for Immigration and Naturalization who sat on this daily board, I mean he was there every day; we sent him up to Indiantown Gap in Pennsylvania which was one of our reception centers, to see the program. And God bless the Defense Department. They had organized a flight out of Guam of families, these were refugees that were actually going to be transferred [stateside], and they happened to be the first ones to be transferred to Indiantown Gap. So when the Commissioner went up to see and welcome these people, his heart melted. It was wonderful, these husbands and wives with cute two or three kids and they were all well-dressed and your heart just went out to them. And in fact I laugh now, when I think of all the trouble DOD had to go through at the time to get the right kind of mix on that plane, but that's basically what we had, it was basically who these people were.

So the Commissioner came in the next day we had a meeting, and said, "I've seen these people. Julia, they are wonderful people, they're going to be good Americans. I didn't see anybody who looked like they'd be wild or murderers or anything like that." So he set the tone for his whole agency, and what we had was a really infectious enthusiasm, of finally after many years of the divisiveness that Vietnam policy had wrought on this country,

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finally here was something we could do which was really very welcoming, healing and important.

And I must say the Defense Department and State were still fussing and fighting, but I didn't get caught in that because I had come from a domestic agency, but at the end of the program there was real healing in the federal government between Defense and State on this thing, as well as in the communities and the churches, because churches resettled a lot of these people, and the churches, as you will recall, had very contentious arguments within and amongst themselves on the policy. But when they were able to say, "Okay, we are going to help resettle a family of Vietnamese," it was a unifying force, and that, I think, is something that is very exciting.

Q: How did you find the states, because I think of places like Fort Chafee, Arkansas, and I think, "My God, putting some Vietnamese in the middle of Arkansas must have been something." How did you find states?

TAFT: Well, first of all, the American government did not resettle anyone. It was through arrangements we made with voluntary organizations, [which] traditionally had resettled refugees, that people were brought to communities. So I can always say, "the United States has not resettled one refugee. If you have a problem with this refugee, I'll find out who sponsored them, and it may be the Catholic Church or the Lutherans or somebody else, but we didn't do it." That was a very important point.

With regard to the states, we had domestic reception areas in California, Florida, Arkansas, and Pennsylvania. And with the exception of California, I think the other three states realized that the refugees were not going to resettle in those states. There was initial concern about whether they were going to be stuck with a refugee camp because refugees in France from Diem Ben Phu of what... 1956... were still in a refugee camp, and they thought, "Well, maybe the government's going to leave them here forever." But we

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assured the [states] that that wasn't the case, and they could see the resettlement out of the area.

It was a great boon to the economy of those three places because we bought a lot of local commodities to feed and assist these people, there were lots of new jobs. So Arkansas did quite well, Pennsylvania did very well. [The camps in both states were on] military national guard sites which were only used on the weekends, so this was a great boon to the economy. And Eglin Air Force Base [in Florida] was small so it didn't have much of an impact.

The big question was California, and early on there were many fierce racially [based] criticisms about the program. In fact, the governor at the time was Governor Brown, and he had as his health and welfare person a man named Mario Oblato, who I still have nightmares about. And he would get in the press about the fact, "We don't want these people. We have enough people in California. We don't need any Vietnamese." And so I got into this debate with him and had to go out there and do press conferences. I told him that, "That's fine, if they don't want any Vietnamese, we will tell every church in California and every retired foreign service officer, and every military person here who would like to help a friend and resettle a friend or a family that California doesn't want them. And if that's what you want we will say that." Well, at that point they said, "Well, no, no, we're not saying that. We just want to make sure that the federal government will pick up the bill."

And in fact that was part of the legislative strategy was to get funds so that we could pay for the resettlement for the first few years for these people. It worked out all fine, but you're right, there were tensions. [But we accomplished so much in] a short time. We started [in] mid-April and finished by December, so it was a [rapid] success.

Q: Well, it was really a magnificent success. I think for all of ulooking at it, this thing worked. Where did you go after that?

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TAFT: I went back to HEW, and that was an election year, '76, and President Carter won, so I stayed just to help in the transition [to the] Carter [administration], and then I left government in '77 and went and wrote a report about the refugee resettlement program: why it worked and what one would do differently the next time, what worked and what we needed to do differently. [The report] actually did come in kind of handy in 1980 when Cuba sent off all of its boat people, the Mariel boat lift. I had all these lessons learned, and I shared them with everybody who needed to know, and they didn't follow my advice so there were some major problems.

So I spent between '77 and '86 doing a variety of both government and consulting work on refugees and emergencies. I help set up the State Department official office of U.S. coordinator for refugees, along the lines that I had followed in 1975. Everybody agreed that that really worked, and the reason it worked wasn't me as a person so much as it had the money, and you were an agency like the State Department that could command respect and had, next to money, also had information. You cannot run these kinds of [operations] without information and without money.

They wanted to replicate that again as a permanent fixture for U.S. policy toward refugees, so I helped create the [refugee coordinator] office for Senator Clark from Iowa. He was there and I worked with him for about a year, and in the meantime I was having these children, I had three children between 1976 and 1980.

Q: Before we leave helping Clark with the refugee thing, did you find yourself fighting bureaucratic battles, and this sort of thing? Was this something people were pretty willing to...?

TAFT: The Secretary of State was interested in it, and Frank Wisner, who had been my deputy on the task force in 1975, was working as the number two in the secretariat for Secretary Vance, he's the one who had me come over and he said, "Julia will solve this problem for us." So he was great, and I had no problem whatsoever.

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The only issue was the budget, because the configuration that I believe could only work is, if the State Department and the coordinator had the budget for all of the agencies that would have a role in the resettlement, that would include what Justice would do, what Health, Education would do, and what State would do, and the Office of Management and Budget never approved that, so it never really worked because you can't coordinate without authority. And in every subsequent ambassador-at-large experience for refugees, it's never worked, and I think that's the reason.

The real wrangling came after Reagan was elected, he came in in 1981 and his Secretary of State was Alexander Haig. Alexander Haig interviewed me for the job of U.S. coordinator for refugees, which I accepted. [Now] I had not worked in the campaign, because I don't consider myself a partisan person and I had worked for every president of the last seven presidents, and I happened to work with Carter on trying to set up this refugee bureau in the State Department. So when Reagan came in and Haig sent over my credentials to be the [refugee coordinator with the rank of] ambassador-at-large, there were people in the White House, [I soon came to find out], who said, "Where was she in the campaign? Why are we giving her an ambassador-at-large job? Why do we need an ambassador-at-large?"

By this time, [the refugee coordinator job] had actually become the only statutorily-mandated ambassador-at-large, and they had all kinds of problems with me as a woman, and a young woman at the time. So I went through about six months of trying to tell them, "Separate me and this job from what we ought to be doing as a government for refugee policy, and here's some things that we need to do." But the new people at the White House thought they could handle it right, and I finally after six months just told Secretary Haig that I was leaving.

[Now] he interpreted my problems as really his problems, [so he supported my appointment. But] he had already run into trouble, when the President got shot and he goes and says, "I'm in charge," and everybody said, "Who the hell are you being in

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charge? We have a Vice-President.” From then on, Haig's star started to go over the horizon very quickly, and I was attached to his star because he's the one who identified me, and so I just gave up and I said, “I'm leaving.” So I [left government].

Q: Did you get involved...but you continued your involvement?

TAFT: Oh, yes, I did a very interesting study on refugee women which was the first study ever done about who are refugees - [turns out] the majority are women, [a fact] which nobody had recognized before - and what very particular concerns do they have and what do they need, and how do you help shape programs and policies that would reflect the needs of these women. So I did a study on that. I did a study on the Canadian immigration program which was really a quite splendid [one from which we could] learn some lessons. I did a study on Haitian refugees for the Ford Foundation. So, I was mostly doing a lot of consulting work.

And then in 1983 my husband [became] the general counsel of the Defense Department, and I knew a lot of people over there, and one of the under-secretaries wanted some thinking done about the role of the military in humanitarian responses, and asked me to come and be a consultant. Which I did, and I worked for about nine months there, helping the military figure out what to do in Central America on humanitarian issues. And I tell you, there was a real thin file about what they were doing, and we wanted to make it a little thicker about good things they could do, a very contentious issue. But got wonderful support on trying to figure out, if you have a military presence doing military exercises or whatever they're doing there, is there a component of their training that could have a positive humanitarian impact?

We got involved in a variety of things, including safe water programs in Honduras, where instead of drilling a well just to [practice drilling] a well, you really try to figure out who needs the water, and you drill a well and teach the people how to take care of it, and you leave the casings there when you leave, unlike the normal military pattern which is you go

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in, you do an exercise, you build the building, you drill your wells, you put your casings in, and then when the exercise is over you tear your building down, you take the casings out, you pack them all up, and you send them to the next location. This is what we are going to do in Bosnia which drives me nuts, but anyway. I was responsible for trying to figure out how the military could do good.

In the course of this we surveyed all of the commanders-in-chief of the services, all the CINCs around the world, asking them what they would like to do if they could do it, and how they would see the utility for training or for good community spirit or for morale for the troops to do more humanitarian work. And we went through this study about what we would do if we could do it. Then we found out there were a lot of legal constraints, and started a way to overcome those constraints, starting with GAO and others.

Anyway, what finally evolved from that was a study with a number of recommendations to the Secretary of Defense who at that time was Caspar Weinberger, we might need a little chart here about where Weinberger went through all these places I've trailed him or led him, but he was the Secretary and I had to do this report which ultimately was to be given to him on what direction the military should take in humanitarian assistance. I handed that report in, my timing was always great on these things, the same day that my husband was approved as the new Deputy Secretary of Defense, so I had to resign immediately from my consultancy, but it was the same day.

So I resigned and he got to be the Deputy Secretary and I have this report, and they really followed up on it and established an office which became a really dynamite office, and a wonderful guy named Bob Walthius ran it eventually and did a splendid job. So that was time well spent, because now when I think back about what the military's attitude is toward a variety of these humanitarian things, it is so different from what it was in 1983 it is like night and day. It's really great. But that was time well spent.

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And then in '84 and '85 I did some more work on refugee issues, and then in January of '86 was appointed by the head of Agency for International Development as the Director of our Office of U.S. Foreign Disaster Assistance [OFDA], which was really a neat job.

Q: So you were with the office of foreign disaster assistance from when to when?

TAFT: From January of '86 until June of '89 when my husband was going to be ambassador to NATO and we were moving. So I had three and a half years in OFDA.

Q: What type of work were you doing during the period you were with AID?

TAFT: When I was with AID during that period, we were still in the throes of the African famine response, just coming out of it, and there were a variety of other disasters going on, what we call the rapid onset disasters versus the complex emergencies. And my staff was responsible for leading the U.S. government in responding to all of them, so we had about 50 people and a pretty small budget, but we always leveraged other money and did a variety of things while we were there. We supported the ambassadors and the AID missions when there were disasters in those countries. We worked closely with other donors.

We worked on the quality of the U.S. response, and in this way what we tried to do is learn from issues like the Mexico City earthquake and do after-action studies about what did we screw up and what we did do well, and then we would get train to do it better. Growing out of a series of really very good self-evaluations we came up, and I wouldn't say it's perfect yet but we've sure come a long way, with the idea of a DART team, a disaster response team, with a variety of competencies from different federal agencies, including State and AID that would go out and do emergency assessments and be there for the management of the disaster.

We used a lot of the services and talents of the U.S. forest service, who do crises all the time, they fire fight all the time, and have very good training, and they helped train us for

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some of our things. We got better equipped. We improved the technology, we had the first fax machines in AID.

Q: Fax is a telephonic transmission of paper.

TAFT: That's right, but you know it was very controversial back then, because State liked to hold its cables and liked to make sure it knew exactly what was being written down. And when the fax machine started, people could be sending all kinds of communications to embassies and to AID missions around the world, and nobody would know what they were saying. It was great. But we needed it for fast response. So that was a fascinating time, it was real crisis-management. I had 260 disasters in the three and a half years I was there.

Q: Can you name a couple of ones that maybe gave some of the greatest challenges to you...?

TAFT: I would say the locust infestations in Africa and the Armenian earthquake, one a...well, actually I'll do three and I'll try to do them quickly, the other was staving off a disaster for Ethiopia.

After the famine in northern Africa, one of the things that happen in famine is that locusts don't come out, they only come out from their cocoons and their eggs only hatch when the soil is moist. Well, the soil had not been moist for years, and then all of a sudden it started raining. And there were locusts, carpets of locusts, and they were coming at the same time as the first crops were hopefully going to be harvested. These people had not been able to have successful crops for so long, and finally they got the crops, they got the rain, the crops started growing, and then all these locusts came.

So we had, I learned more about the entomology of locusts and their sex life, it was really something, we had simultaneous efforts in about eight countries in Africa to [spray] locusts. But the concern was, if we don't [spray] in Africa, [locusts will go north] to Morocco and [then spread] over to the Middle East. Everybody's really nervous about it, the

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Europeans were heavily involved in our campaign, and we just did a smashing job. But we did it for two years, and finally the third year of this I said, "Time out. I'm supposed to do disaster response. I've told you you've got to make this a development priority in AID, you've got to get your extension services funded, you have to get the indigenous capability going, we cannot deal with it disaster by disaster."

And the high point really was getting the King of Morocco to really take the leadership for all of northern Africa, to come up with a collective strategy on how to get, I won't go into all the details, but there are certain areas where the [locusts] breed and [from which they] spread. [If we] get those breeding areas, and some of them were in the most difficult areas of conflict in Algeria, in Western Sahara, in Eritrea, I mean you name all the tougher places to go and this is where the locusts liked to live, [then we stop the spread]. [The King] was very helpful in doing some cross-border negotiations and getting access. So that was very exciting and very good, and ultimately AID's Africa bureau did take up responsibility for pest control and then fortunately I left.

But that is a story, that's another real success story where human intervention really did prevent another massive wave of starvation in these countries. We've had a very, it wasn't just the U.S. government, although we led it, a real targeted, not extraordinarily expensive, \$100 million we spent, but to save crops for a long time, highly appreciated initiative by all the countries with whom we worked, it was just great. It was terrific. So that was a wonderful thing. In Armenia there was a massive earthquake on Pearl Harbor Day, December the 7th, 1988, at the same time that the head of Russia or the Soviet Union, Gorbachev, was meeting with Ronald Reagan in New York at a summit. There was a massive earthquake in Armenia. That was a Wednesday. Two days later we had bullied our way into approval from the Russians to go with a rescue team.

Q: You must have had an awful lot of pressure from the Armeniacommunity, which is considerable.

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TAFT: That's right. The Armenian community was very concerned and we had a meeting, actually on the Thursday I met with them and again on Friday. And they wanted to do all kinds of things. And what we agreed was that four representatives could go on our plane. And we got a plane that we hired from OFDA and we got our search and rescue dog teams and some specialists including Fred Cluny who was subsequently killed in Chechnya doing a similar relief opportunity. He was part of our team, we had 35 people and a lot of assistance to go into Armenia right away. And it was unbelievable, of course, because nobody thought we could get in and nobody thought it would work. And everybody was so wonderful to us in Armenia and so surprised that Americans would be there to help. I can still feel it now...it was unbelievable.

And we had no communications. So first thing I did when we landed was I went down to see the head of the Armenian Soviet republic, and this man had not slept for three days, and I extended the condolences of President Reagan and the American people, and said, "This is what we've got. Tell me where you want me to go." He pulled out a map and he said, "Here it is. You go anywhere and you do anything because everything is ruined." So I said, "What's the biggest town?" And he showed me the biggest town that was hit that he felt would be useful, and so I said, "Well, if anybody wants to know where the Americans are, we're in Laniakhan." And in fact for three days nobody knew really too much about what we were doing and where we were because the communications were so bad. And many of us stayed in Laniakhan doing our work, and the Armenians stayed in Yerevan, calling back to the United States telling them kind of what was happening.

It was an incredible time, because first of all, the destruction was just so profound, but the Soviets were so disorganized. They didn't know what to do. And we weren't really sure we knew all the things we were supposed to be doing either. But at least we were there, and it was such an incredible statement of support for the people of Armenia that I was asked to go up to Moscow and brief up in Moscow, and hold press conferences, and the Soviets were immensely pleased. The President... I came back and talked with the President and

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debriefed him. And then he had a special ceremony for the relief team when they came back, and with the Armenian people. The Armenian Americans were great because I said, "Don't do anything until we get back and we figure out exactly what it is you need to do," and then we worked with them on how they could best respond.

And it was a real high point in American relations with Russia. And one of the things that President Reagan said to me when I was describing this devastation and also the reaction about our presence, he said, "You know, with Chernobyl the destruction was so unspeakable and unimaginable"...that they had started to see a change in the Russians' attitudes after Chernobyl.

Q: Chernobyl being a nuclear plant melt-down.

TAFT: Meltdown. And that had happened what, three years before, it was ten year's anniversary now, so about two years before. He said, "I bet you there's going to be something dramatic about the impact of this as well." He was absolutely right, great crises are always a contributor to political change, and I think that occurred. But then the Russians were wonderful, I got an award from the Supreme Soviet for personal courage and a big ceremony, they were just overwhelmed. But the people in the streets in Laniakhan said it all, they said, "You're an American...are you British?" And I'd say, "No, I'm American." And they'd say, "What are you doing here?" "Well, we're here to help." "Why would you want to help?" "Because you need us and we care."

And although we found lots of dead bodies, many, many, many, many more than we ever think we could have saved, the fact that we were there and were able to hold people and cry with them and share with them what the stuff is that we brought, it was...I'll never forget it, it was just absolutely profound.

The third example of something that happened during that tenure was Operation Lifeline Sudan where we had, where the government of Sudan was fighting with the southern rebels, had been for years, twenty-five years. And a number of people were caught in the

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cross-fire, and the estimates of people who would die were a half-million, a million people if we didn't get in some major supplies. And there was a huge effort I was closely involved in that started what was called Operation Lifeline Sudan and it worked very well where we did get agreements from the government and agreements from the rebels to have safe passage routes and have distribution points.

Q: How did you find dealing with them? I would have thought they would be uncooperative. In a civil war sometimes it's best to have a crisis, famine and all; it's a method of control.

TAFT: It was. I think there were two elements that were particularly troublesome in this one. One is that some of the people who were starving the most were in fact northern Sudanese, they weren't the Black Animists and Christians of the south, they were right there in the north. They just happened to be Arabs that the government didn't particularly care about. So [these northern Arab tribesmen] had that problem, and then [there were] those that were involved in the conflict in the South. The government was headed by, it's gotten much worse now, by Sheik El-Madi and he was sort of caught between the fundamentalists and his own political problems in Sudan. He didn't want to have all these NGOs [non-governmental organizations] running around feeding people, but he didn't want to publicly seem as though he was opposed. So we got him in a position where he did publicly support a number of things that we tried to do.

But the U.S. government also was a problem at the time. I was having a lot of trouble with the State Department not being tough enough on the government of Sudan. I would say, "We've got to tell them that they can't let their own people starve." And some of the people in the State Department were rather difficult to deal with. And there was a very good television series, news series, on the starvation in northern part of Sudan which I got a tape of and I gave to the press secretary to the Secretary of State, and I said, "I want the Secretary of State to see this tape because he's meeting this week with the Foreign Minister of Sudan, and I want him to know that that Foreign Minister's government is starving these people." So my friend, who is Chuck Bregman, he said, "Well, okay, I'll call

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you back.” So that afternoon I had a chance to brief the Secretary of State and showed this video and he said, we all said, the Assistant Secretary for Africa was there, who was a good friend but he was not focused on this issue as much as I would have hoped, Chet Crocker.

Q: He was very much focused on South Africa.

TAFT: That's right. He's a wonderful guy, but his attention was in South Africa and my problem was in Sudan. So we saw this and the Secretary turned to Chet and said, “Is this true?” And Chet said, “Yes, but you know the south is also creating a lot of problems for these people.” I said, “That's another issue. This part they control and this part they could get access, they could give us access to it, and I need you to say something to the Foreign Minister.” So Schultz was 100% behind me and that helped an awful lot because that then got the bureaucracy to sort of say, “Let's be creative and flexible in how we deal with Sudan.”

They also up until that point had not allowed anyone to go into southern Sudan to do assessments, and they didn't because they didn't want to, they couldn't go through Khartoum, they'd have to go across the border from Uganda or Kenya and the State Department said, “We have diplomatic relations with Sudan. It's their sovereign territory, we can't be sending people in across the border in the dark of night to find out how bad the famine is.” So I just hired some other people to do it for me since I couldn't go myself. And we got the assessments and then we knew what we wanted to do and were able then to work out an arrangement with the U.N. and with the governments, so it worked out pretty well.

It just seemed to me that in all my experiences in government, and they've all been positive, the thing that I have been most rewarded by is how responsive and creative people can be when you give them some rein. If you say, “Okay, figure out what, if you could do anything, what would you do, and what's the pros and cons of doing that and

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then you make a decision and if that's what you want to do then you sell it on that basis." Too much I think we're all constrained by "Gosh if we do 'X' somebody else is going to be mad," or "We can't do this because we've tried it before and it didn't work." And that is a real problem I think in a lot of areas, and the State Department is one of them.

Mostly the State Department was very supportive of what we were doing because the ambassadors were the ones out there living in these countries saying, "Oh for god's sake can I offer anything of a humanitarian nature?" So they were always really supportive. In a natural disaster, there's no problem. In a complex emergency where there are political overtones, questions of access, questions of U.S. taking the lead, questions of a bunch of people, witnesses running around, is always difficult diplomatically, so we always had a few more problems on that.

Q: Did you find at that time that much of your work was, I don't want to use this in the pejorative sense cause I don't mean it that way, but media-driven?

TAFT: No, not mine.

Q: Well, I'm just thinking of the media showing the Kurds havin trouble, or highlighting Somalia or just the CNN effect in general.

TAFT: Let me just say that, for the whole African famine, if it hadn't come across on the television, the BBC [British Broadcasting Corporation], into the living rooms of American people that these folks were all dying, I think it would have been very difficult to galvanize the level of commitment and concern. Media's always very helpful to do that. But sometimes you don't, we had seen during my tenure, CNN would call and ask if we would take them in because they couldn't get in. Now these people can get in faster than anybody. But media's always helpful. If you need the attention media can be very helpful.

But I don't think they're, well, I guess it is, you're right, I suppose it is more media-driven than we would like to say. I mean right now southern Sudan is as bad off now as it was

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when I was trying to save them and nobody knows about it. There are no cameras there, nobody's paying any attention to southern Sudan. Now if we could get CNN in there to do a real profile on the slavery, the murders, the devastation, the starvation, it would be off the charts, but you know, we don't do that.

And we don't have the kind of money that we used to have to be able to invest in real good humanitarian responses. The whole foreign aid bill is in such, I mean aid funding is in such jeopardy now, and that's the kind of money you need to use to avoid disasters. So that you get your extension agents out there to be able to help people grow the food so that there isn't a famine, and that you get your research on drought-resistant seeds, and that you get your right kind of flood control so the floods and monsoons don't devastate areas. I mean a lot of the programs that we have always thought were crisis-prevention programs are being defunded, and I am very concerned over the problem that we can get money for the disasters sometimes, but we don't get money for the development is a real, it's a very striking problem.

Q: Well, think we should?...you left there when?

TAFT: In 1989 and went with my husband and three children to a wonderful place in Brussels where my husband was the Ambassador to NATO and I was his spouse. So I had a three-year sabbatical, first time I'd ever not...well, I was thinking it was going to be a sabbatical, and then we found out it was really very busy, and I have a lot of respect for foreign service spouses, male or female, because I think a lot of times they're the unsung heroines and heroes.

Q: Well, one last question. Looking at it, does the United States on disasters, refugees or what have you, I mean talking about world problems, has it remained sort of the preeminent leader in responding, or are there any other countries picking up the reins from time to time we'd love to drop?

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TAFT: I don't think I see much evidence that we want to drop the leadership on the humanitarian side. We want to share it more and we want other people to start paying for it. But it's good politics, it works, it's good for America. And that kind of leadership is great. We're seeing the Japanese are putting more in, the European Union gives almost a billion dollars a year on humanitarian emergency relief. I think there's a good partnership. I don't think we're trying to make it competitive. It's something we do well, and it's also a real statement of our moral commitment, that people who, for no reason of their own find themselves in a devastating situation, we're there to help. We still are the most generous country in terms of donations to the refugee programs, and in accepting refugees for resettlement as well.

Q: Okay, well, should we cut off at this point? Well I want to thank you very much.

TAFT: Okay, okay because I think...

Q: *PVOs are?*

TAFT: Private voluntary organizations, and what I'd like to just say is a few things because I know the audience is related to foreign, is interested in foreign assistance. George Kennan once said that the trouble with the United Nations was that it's all top and no bottom. But the bottom now, we're seeing, is really the emergence and explosion of the civil society and a lot of countries that are represented in the United Nations.

And the civil society is being mobilized in large part by non-governmental organizations, people associating because of common interests who often want to do something and say something or make things different for their lives and their communities. These NGOs were absolutely essential in the shaping of the Rio Conference on Sustainable Development which raised the level of awareness for the whole world about the environmental degradation of our collective societies. They were critical to the success of the U.N. Conference on Human Rights in 1993 where the whole issue of human rights and

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the role of women in human rights was very much brought to the forefront by these non-governmental organizations. The Social Summit which was held in Copenhagen, Denmark in 1994, was it '94 or '95, that was '95. This past year the Social Summit was really influenced a great deal by non-governmental organizations telling the governments and the U.N. that things were not in good shape and that they needed to change differently. And the Beijing Women's Conference as well.

So this whole question of NGO impact on government and international policy is something that is really taking off. Our organization of interaction which is the American Council for Voluntary International Action is the largest U.S. coalition of American agencies that work internationally. So they have partnerships with these non-governmental organizations and they themselves have become a collective force for influencing policy domestically and internationally. We have in our membership now over 150 agencies and we are asked all the time, "What is our community's opinion about Bosnia? What we ought to do about Bosnia? How donors ought to be spending their money in Bosnia? What should we be doing about Rwanda? What about the legislation on the Hill?"

We are now becoming both a lightning rod and hopefully a collective voice for a collective concern about issues that we profoundly care about regarding American foreign policy and our relationship as a country to people outside of our borders. And we've got a lot of very interesting training sessions and conferences and materials that we develop to try to help the American people understand that they have got to care about what happens in the rest of the world, we are not isolationists, we cannot be, that the health in Africa and the Ebola virus in Africa is just going to come to us if we don't watch out and care about the health status in Africa.

Environmental concerns in this hemisphere are not going to be solved by just having emission controls of our factories in the United States. There's a whole contributing force of pollution out there that we need to try to help and assist. Probably whenever the global warming becomes a fact rather than a maybe people will get, it will grab their attention.

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But I think that the biggest issue we have as a country dealing with our foreign policy is an unfortunate perception that foreign policy is foreign, when in fact it's not, it's domestic.

So we deal with that, and it's a very, it's exciting to be in the NGO field while we're working on these questions because we think we are very values-driven, we're not there to get money or to promote business or whatever, we just think it's very important ethical and humanitarian reasons for promoting development and assistance internationally. And I hope that we're sort of maybe at the bottom of a valley right now and that we're going to take off and get more public support. But all of the foreign service officers who are retired and that are out there, they need to continue to explain to their colleagues and friends and neighbors and churches why it's really important. And it's really misunderstood, really misunderstood in this country. That's it.

Q: Well, okay, thank you.

End of interview